

College Spoken English Teaching Reform in China: Enhancing Communicative Competence

Yujuan Guo

GLC, Eurasia University, Xi'an, China, 710065
guoyujuan@eurasia.edu

Abstract: *This thesis explores the urgent need for reform in college spoken English teaching methodologies in China to better meet the linguistic and professional demands of students in an increasingly globalized world. The study identifies the limitations of traditional teaching methods and examines innovative strategies, including the integration of technology, interactive learning, and curriculum restructuring. The proposed reforms aim to enhance students' communicative competence and prepare them for effective communication in diverse professional environments.*

Keywords: *College Spoken English Teaching Reform, Communicative Competence, Interactive Learning, Technology Integration, Curriculum Restructuring, China*

1. Introduction

The courses in Chinese college are mainly about reading/writing and listening/speaking. Most teachers pay more attention to reading and writing because these skills cover a broader range of content. Proficiency in spoken English is increasingly vital for Chinese college students, given its importance in global communication, academic success, and professional opportunities. However, traditional English teaching methods in China often fall short in meeting these demands. The reliance on rote learning, lecture-based instruction, and a focus on grammar and vocabulary over practical language use has limited students' ability to effectively communicate in real-world situations. This thesis explores the necessity of reforming college spoken English teaching practices in China to better equip students with the skills they need. By examining the current challenges and proposing innovative solutions, this study aims to provide a comprehensive framework for enhancing spoken English instruction in Chinese higher education.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

- Identify challenges in current college spoken English teaching methods in China.
- Explore innovative teaching strategies and technological integrations.
- Propose a framework for effective spoken English teaching reform in Chinese colleges.

1.2. Significance of the Study

The proposed reforms aim to significantly improve students' spoken English proficiency, equipping them with the necessary skills to thrive in both academic and professional settings. This study will contribute to the academic field by providing insights into effective teaching strategies and offering practical recommendations for policymakers and educators. Additionally, the findings can help institutions design more effective spoken English programs that meet the evolving needs of students.

1.3. Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on college-level spoken English education in China, examining institutions in various geographical contexts to provide a broad understanding of the challenges and potential solutions. However, the research may be limited by the availability of data and the generalizability of the findings across different educational systems and cultural settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Early Beginnings*

English language teaching in China can be traced back to the early 19th century when Western missionaries and traders first introduced the language^[2] (Bolton, 2003). The Treaty of Nanking in 1842, which ended the First Opium War, marked the beginning of China's forced interaction with Western powers, leading to the establishment of treaty ports where English began to be taught. Missionary schools played a crucial role in spreading English education during this period, primarily for religious and commercial purposes.

2.2. *The Late Qing Dynasty and Early Republic Period*

During the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) and the early Republic of China (1912-1949), English gained prominence as a necessary tool for diplomacy, trade, and modernization. Educational reforms in the early 20th century saw the introduction of English into the national curriculum. However, English teaching was limited to a small elite, and the focus was primarily on reading and translation skills.

2.3. *The Communist Era*

The Maoist Period (1949-1976)

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, English language teaching experienced significant fluctuations. During the early years of the Communist regime, English was seen as a tool for accessing scientific and technical knowledge from the West. However, the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) severely disrupted education. English, along with other foreign languages, was branded as bourgeois and imperialist, leading to a drastic decline in its teaching and learning.^[1]

2.4. *The Reform Era (1980s to Present)*

Expansion of English Education

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed an exponential growth in English language education in China. English became a mandatory subject in primary and secondary schools, and universities expanded their English programs. The focus shifted from reading and translation to communicative competence, reflecting global trends in language teaching. The adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods marked a significant shift towards developing students' speaking and listening skills^[1] (Adamson, 2004).

2.5. *Evolution of English language teaching methodologies in China*

Traditional methods of English teaching in China, including the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method, and Communicative Language Teaching, have played significant roles in shaping the current landscape of English language education." While these methods have contributed to some foundational knowledge and skills, they also present numerous limitations that have necessitated ongoing reforms. This chapter delves into the predominant traditional methods used in Chinese classrooms, their underlying philosophies, and the inherent limitations that impact student learning and proficiency in spoken English. The Grammar-Translation Method has been one of the most enduring approaches in English language teaching in China. Rooted in the classical method of teaching Latin and Greek, it emphasizes the explicit teaching of grammatical rules and the translation of sentences between English and Chinese^[5] (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). It focuses on the written language rather than spoken, emphasizes on grammatical accuracy and the ability to translate complex texts, uses of rote memorization for vocabulary and grammar rules. Reading and translating literary texts are the primary classroom activity. This method provides a systematic understanding of English grammar. However, it neglects the development of communicative competence, particularly in speaking and listening, promotes passive learning and memorization rather than active use of language and does not adequately prepare students for real-life conversational situations.^[10] (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). It can be demotivating for students who find the focus on grammar and translation tedious.

Emerging in the mid-20th century, the Audio-Lingual Method focuses on language as a set of habits

that can be learned through repetitive drills and practice. Influenced by behaviorist theories of learning, it emphasizes mimicry and memorization of set phrases and structures. The key features of this method are repetitive drilling of language patterns and structures, use of dialogues and pattern practice as core activities, emphasis on correct pronunciation and intonation and immediate correction of errors to reinforce correct usage^[10] (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, it only focuses on rote learning without fostering deep understanding or creativity, does not encourage spontaneous use of language in real-life contexts, limited to the memorization of set dialogues, which may not transfer to actual conversational ability so it can become monotonous and fail to engage students over time^[3] (Brown, 2007).

The Direct Method, also known as the Natural Method, emerged as a response to the shortcomings of the Grammar-Translation Method. Developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this method aimed to teach language more naturally, emphasizing oral communication and immersion in the target language. The Direct Method sought to replicate the way people learn their first language, focusing on direct association between meaning and the target language without translation^[10] (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

However, it can be challenging for beginners who lack foundational vocabulary and grammar, may not provide enough grammatical explanations for students to understand language rules, requires highly skilled teachers proficient in the target language, and can be difficult to implement in large classes where individualized attention is limited. One of the primary limitations of traditional methods like the Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual Methods is their insufficient focus on communicative competence. While these methods may develop students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, they often fail to equip them with the skills needed for effective communication in real-life situations. Traditional methods often prioritize reading and writing over speaking and listening. As a result, students may struggle with oral communication and understanding spoken English. The lack of interactive activities in traditional methods means that students do not get sufficient practice in using language in spontaneous conversations or collaborative tasks. Traditional methods tend to emphasize grammatical accuracy over fluency. While accuracy is important, the focus on error correction and the fear of making mistakes can inhibit students' willingness to speak and experiment with the language. Immediate correction of errors, as seen in the Audio-Lingual Method, can discourage students from speaking freely and reduce their confidence in using English. The rigid structure of traditional methods limits opportunities for creative and expressive language use, which is essential for developing fluency and confidence. This approach does not encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, or the ability to use language creatively. Students may find repetitive drills and translation exercises monotonous, leading to a lack of motivation and engagement. Memorization without meaningful context or application can result in poor retention and limited ability to apply knowledge in new situations.

3. Current Trends in College Spoken English Education

In recent years, there has been a significant shift in language teaching pedagogy, moving away from traditional methods towards more dynamic and interactive approaches. Two prominent methodologies that have gained traction are Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an approach that organizes learning around meaningful tasks that learners need to complete using the target language. Unlike traditional methods that prioritize grammar and vocabulary in isolation, TBLT emphasizes the use of language as a tool for achieving specific outcomes.^[6]

3.1. Technological Integration in Language Learning

Technological integration in language learning refers to the incorporation of digital tools and resources into the educational process to enhance the teaching and acquisition of languages. This integration has transformed traditional language teaching methods, making learning more interactive, accessible, and engaging for students. It allows for personalized learning experiences, greater accessibility to resources, and the development of 21st-century skills.

3.2. Interactive Learning Tools

Mobile applications designed for language learning have become extremely popular due to their accessibility and interactive features. These apps often include games, quizzes, and exercises that help learners practice vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. The use of spaced repetition algorithms in

these apps help reinforce learning by reminding users to review words and concepts at optimal intervals.

3.3. Digital Language Labs

Modern language labs are equipped with computers and specialized software that facilitate the development of language skills in an interactive environment. These labs allow students to listen to native speakers, record their own voices, and practice pronunciation, all while receiving instant feedback. The use of headsets and microphones enables immersive listening and speaking practice.

3.4. Multiple resources

Audio and Video Content: The use of multimedia, such as podcasts, video lessons, and films, enriches the language learning experience by exposing students to authentic language usage. Platforms like YouTube and TED Talks offer a vast array of resources that cater to different proficiency levels and learning styles.

3.5. Online Learning Platforms

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): Platforms like Coursera, edX, and FutureLearn offer language courses that can be accessed by learners worldwide. These courses often include video lectures, quizzes, and peer-reviewed assignments, providing a comprehensive learning experience.

Virtual Classrooms: Tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Classroom facilitate real-time language learning sessions, enabling students and teachers to interact and collaborate from different locations. These platforms often support features like screen sharing, breakout rooms, and chat functions, which enhance the learning experience.^[7]

4. Benefits of Technological Integration in Language Learning

4.1. Accessibility and Flexibility

Anytime, Anywhere Learning: Technology allows learners to access language learning resources at any time and from any location, making it easier for them to fit language learning into their busy schedules. This flexibility is especially beneficial for adult learners and those with other commitments.

Inclusive Learning: Technological tools can be tailored to accommodate learners with different needs, including those with disabilities. For instance, text-to-speech and speech-to-text tools assist visually impaired or hearing-impaired learners, making language learning more inclusive.

4.2. Personalization and Adaptation

Customized Learning Paths: Technology enables the creation of personalized learning paths that adapt to the learner's pace, preferences, and proficiency level. This customization helps maintain engagement and motivation by ensuring that learners are neither bored nor overwhelmed. Digital tools provide instant feedback on exercises and quizzes, helping learners quickly identify and correct mistakes. This immediate feedback loop accelerates the learning process and enhances retention.

4.3. Enhanced Engagement

Interactive Content: The use of multimedia and gamified content makes language learning more interactive and enjoyable. Engaged learners are more likely to persist in their studies and achieve better outcomes. Simulations, VR, and language exchange platforms offer learners opportunities to practice language skills in real-world contexts, which enhances their ability to use the language effectively in everyday situations.

4.4. Collaboration and Social Interaction

Technology connects learners with speakers of the target language from around the world, providing valuable opportunities for cultural exchange and real-life practice. This global connectivity is crucial for developing communicative competence. Collaborative tools enable learners to work together on

language projects, engage in discussions, and provide mutual support. This peer learning environment fosters a sense of community and encourages cooperative learning.

5. Impact on Learning Outcomes

5.1. Equity in Education

The digital divide can lead to significant disparities in educational outcomes. Students who have access to technology and the internet are more likely to benefit from interactive learning tools, personalized learning experiences, and a wider range of educational resources. In contrast, students without such access may fall behind, widening the achievement gap.

5.2. Teacher Training

Professional Development: Effective integration of technology requires teachers to be trained in using digital tools and platforms. Ongoing professional development is crucial to ensure that educators can effectively incorporate technology into their language teaching practices.

5.3. Analysis of Current Challenges

Analysis of traditional lecture-based methods and their limitations.

Traditional lecture-based teaching methods have been the cornerstone of education for centuries. While this approach has been effective in delivering large amounts of information to students, it is increasingly being scrutinized for its limitations in fostering deep learning, critical thinking, and engagement. This section provides an analysis of the traditional lecture-based methods and explores the challenges they pose in the context of contemporary education.^[4]

5.3.1. Lack of Student Engagement

One of the most significant criticisms of traditional lecture-based methods is the lack of active student engagement. In a typical lecture, the teacher is the primary source of information, and students are passive recipients. Lectures often do not provide opportunities for students to interact with the material, the instructor, or their peers. This can result in lower levels of engagement and motivation, as students may feel disconnected from the learning process.^[5] Research has shown that students' attention tends to wane after about 10-15 minutes in a lecture setting. Without interactive elements or opportunities for active participation, students may struggle to maintain focus throughout the entire lecture, leading to a decrease in information retention.

5.3.2. Surface Learning vs. Deep Learning

Traditional lecture-based methods are often criticized for promoting surface learning rather than deep learning. Surface learning occurs when students focus on memorizing facts and details to pass exams, rather than understanding and applying concepts at a deeper level.

5.3.3. Teacher-Centered Learning

Traditional lecture-based methods are inherently teacher-centered, meaning that the instructor is the primary authority and the main source of knowledge. This approach can have several drawbacks:

In a teacher-centered classroom, students have little control over their learning. They are expected to absorb information passively, which can reduce their sense of ownership and responsibility for their education. Teacher-centered approaches often limit opportunities for collaborative learning, where students work together to solve problems, discuss ideas, and learn from each other. Collaborative learning is known to enhance understanding and retention, but it is often underutilized in lecture-based settings.

5.3.4. Limited Feedback and Assessment Opportunities

In traditional lecture-based courses, opportunities for formative feedback and assessment are often limited. This can hinder students' ability to gauge their understanding of the material and make necessary adjustments to their learning strategies. Traditional lectures often do not include regular, low-stakes assessments that allow students to monitor their progress and receive feedback throughout the course. Without these formative assessments, students may not be aware of their weaknesses until it is too late to improve.^[9]

5.4. Need for Practical Application in Language Teaching

To address the limitations of traditional methods, there is a growing recognition of the need for practical application in language teaching. Modern approaches, such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), emphasize the importance of using language as a tool for communication rather than just a subject to be studied. To enhance the practical application of language skills, language educators are increasingly incorporating activities that simulate real-world communication. These activities include speaking exercises, listening comprehension tasks, and interactive games that encourage students to use the language in context.^[7]

6. Proposed Innovative Strategies

Interactive learning methods are educational approaches that actively involve students in the learning process, promoting engagement, collaboration, and deeper understanding. These methods can be highly effective in addressing diverse learning needs and improving overall educational outcomes.

Project-Based Learning is a pedagogical approach where students engage in complex, real-world projects over an extended period. These projects require students to apply their knowledge and skills to solve problems or create products. Projects are often based on real-world problems or scenarios, making learning more relevant and engaging. Students have significant control over their learning process, including the choice of topics and methods. Projects typically involve group work, fostering teamwork and communication skills^[8].

Gamification involves incorporating game-like elements into educational activities to enhance student engagement and motivation. This approach leverages elements such as points, badges, and leaderboards to create a more interactive learning experience. It uses game elements such as rewards, challenges, and competition to motivate students and aims to make learning more enjoyable and engaging by applying game design principles. Gamification can significantly boost student motivation and participation by making learning more enjoyable.

The Flipped Classroom model reverses traditional teaching by having students learn new content at home through videos or readings and then applying this knowledge in the classroom through interactive activities and discussions. Students review new material at home, often using video lectures or online resources. Classroom time is used for applying concepts through activities, discussions, and problem-solving. Maximizes in-class time for interactive activities and collaborative learning. It allows students to learn at their own pace outside of class, leading to more personalized and effective learning experiences and provides more opportunities for applying knowledge and receiving feedback in a supportive classroom environment.

7. Future Research Directions

7.1. Longitudinal Studies on Teaching Innovations

Future research should conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effectiveness of blended learning models in language education. These studies could track students' language proficiency, engagement, and retention rates over several years to determine the sustained impact of this approach.

Investigate the long-term effects of project-based learning on students' critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and real-world language application. Research could explore how these skills translate into academic and professional success.

7.2. Cross-Cultural Comparisons in Language Teaching

Conduct cross-cultural comparisons of the effectiveness of different language teaching methods, such as TBLT, PBL, and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), in various cultural and educational contexts. This research could reveal insights into how cultural factors influence the success of these methods.

Explore the role of cultural competence in language learning across different regions. Research could examine how integrating cultural content into language curricula impacts students' intercultural communication skills and global awareness^[9].

8. Conclusion

The landscape of college English teaching in China is at a pivotal point, marked by the need for substantial reform to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving globalized world. Traditional methods, while foundational, have shown limitations in equipping students with the communicative competence and practical language skills required in real-life scenarios. The shift towards more innovative approaches, such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Project-Based Learning (PBL), and the integration of technology, offers promising avenues to enhance language proficiency and overall educational outcomes.

However, these changes also bring challenges, such as the digital divide, the risk of over-reliance on technology, and the need for continuous professional development for educators. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort from policymakers, educational institutions, and teachers. By continuing to innovate and adapt, the field of English language education in China can better serve its students, preparing them not only for academic success but also for meaningful participation in the global community[10].

In summary, the reform of college English teaching in China is not just about changing methods but about transforming the educational experience to foster a generation of learners who are confident, competent, and ready to thrive in an interconnected world. The journey ahead is challenging, but with thoughtful implementation and ongoing research, it is a journey that promises to yield significant rewards for students, educators, and society as a whole.

References

- [1] Adamson, B. (2004). *China's English: A History of English in Chinese Education*. Hong Kong University Press.
- [2] Bolton, K. (2003). *Chinese Englishes: A Sociolinguistic History*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching (5th ed.)*. Pearson Education.
- [4] Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1996). *English Teaching and Learning in China*. *Language Teaching*, 29(2), 61-80.
- [6] Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- [7] Garrison, D. R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). *Blended Learning: Uncovering its Transformative Potential in Higher Education*. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95-105.
- [8] Hu, G. (2005). *English Language Education in China: Policies, Progress, and Problems*.
- [9] Hu, Y., & McGrath, I. (2012). *Integrating ICT into College English: An Implementation Study of a National Reform*. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 60(5), 817-840.
- [10] Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching (3rd ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.